

The Drawing in Landscape Design and Urbanism

Frits Palmboom, Bruno Notteboom, Kornelia Dimitrova, Bart Decroos

This issue of *OASE* explores the agency of drawing – as activity and artefact – in landscape design and urbanism. Initiated by guest editor Frits Palmboom, co-founder of the Rotterdam design studio Palmbout Urban Landscapes and emeritus professor at Delft University of Technology, this issue investigates the agency of the drawing from both a practical and an academic perspective. What does the drawing *do* within the design processes of landscape architects and urban designers, and how can we *(re)think* the drawing within contemporary and historical design practices? These questions were posed to the professional and academic field by means of a call for papers based on three qualities of the drawing as they emerge from contemporary practice. First, the drawing as an analytical instrument: Since in urban design and landscape architecture the transformation of the existing (urban) landscape is at stake, in what way is drawing a means to investigate, understand and conceptualize this? Secondly, the role of the drawing within the design process: How does drawing help to generate ideas for spatial interventions? How does the drawing mediate between the design and the eventual physical realisations, and how does it deal with the factors of time, change and uncertainty so inherent to landscape and urban design? Third, the drawing as an instrument for discussion: How does the drawing allow the transformation of the (urban) landscape to be discussed in a broader social field, as a means to make intentions or concerns explicit, and to help define the urban project?

The question of what the agency of the drawing is in these three capacities derives urgency from current developments in landscape architecture and urban design. These disciplines are historically anchored in housing, land use and embellishment issues, but today also include questions of ecology, energy transition or ‘metabolism’, in a context of increasing participation and coproduction. Which new ways of analysing, designing and discussing do these new issues lead to, and which drawings are being developed? How do drawings help to ‘spatialise’ the multitude of information from all these disciplines and problem fields and to make it accessible for spatial interventions? What are the historical precedents? By including the capacity of the drawing as a medium for conversation in the call, we also wanted to pose the question of the sociopolitical dimension of the drawing: To what extent does it help determine what does and does not appear in the image, and who does and does not have a voice?

While *OASE* 105 was focused on the architectural drawing, this issue extends to the disciplines of landscape design and urbanism. In *OASE* 105, with reference to architecture critic Robin Evans, the drawing was questioned as an instrument that mediates between design and building.¹ The starting point was the active role of the drawing, not as a mere instrument necessary for the direct translation of a design idea into built reality, but as a practice in which the gap between drawing and building becomes a productive moment. In this issue, however, the mediating role of the drawing in landscape design and urbanism is even more pronounced. Almost by

¹ Bart Decroos, Véronique Patteeuw, Aslı Çiçek, Jantje Engels, ‘The Drawing as Practice’, *OASE* 105 (2020), 13-23.

definition, the landscape and urban design drawing ends up in a broader arena than the architectural drawing, given the scale on which designs are made (from street design to regional plan) and the number of parties involved at the table (not only clients and users, but also the many forums for discussion and decision making). Whereas the architectural drawing – however complex its relationship with reality – is in a certain sense always a ‘drawing of a building’, the mediating role of the drawing in landscape design and urbanism often begins earlier: in the analysis of the urban or landscape context in the broadest sense, or even in determining the commission. Landscape design and urbanism are deeply permeated by the importance of process in design: the factors of time and uncertainty play a great role. Plans usually cover a longer period of time, drawings go through many phases and procedures, city and landscape are ‘never finished’. How do drawings deal with that?

Observations and Fields of Tension

The contributions to this issue approach the medium of drawing from different points of view. The cases range from the landscape drawing from ground level, through the bird’s-eye view to the map and diagram, and include both digital and handmade drawings. Starting from the three qualities of the drawing mentioned above, the selected contributions led to different observations.

A first observation is that these three qualities do not form chronological stages but are strongly interrelated; they feed each other reciprocally. Chiara Cavalieri, for example, in her article, with André Corboz, refers to the concept of description.² This is a mode of drawing based on a gradual transition between ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ the territory, between analysis and design. The practice of, and reflection on, mapping over the past decades has clearly shown that both the map and the plan have a projective character.³ The character of the site is as much a matter of creative interpretation as the design itself. Partly due to the rise of public participation and participatory planning since the late 1960s, the drawing as an instrument of communication and discussion also increasingly became part of analysis and project in an exploratory stage. The articles by Elke Couchez or Nithin Bathla and Sumedha Garg argue that a map can be read as both documentation of place as well as an invitation to concrete actions and possibilities. A design can be a hypothesis that resulted from the analysis. An analysis can be drawn in order to bring forth an argument for or against a decision in the design process. Be it the inclination of the hand, the eye, the technology or the audience, (reading a) drawing is rooted in a widely shared visual culture, but remains a subjective act within.

A second observation is that all drawings presented in this issue are situated in a field of tension between the reduction and multiplication of meaning. It has often been argued that the landscape drawing or map is a reduction of reality, an interpretation and/or projection that is not ‘neutral’ but is directed by the author(s), together with specific social, economic or political stakeholders.⁴ This reduction gives the drawing its strength and scope of action. At the same time, in various

² André Corboz, ‘La descrizione tra lettura e scrittura’, 2nd International Conference on Urbanism: “Describing territories”, Prato (1995), later published as ‘La description: entre lecture et écriture’, in André Corboz, *Le Territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais* (Paris: Les éditions de l’imprimeur, 2001).

³ Jill Desimini, Charles Waldheim, *Cartographic Grounds: Projecting the Landscape Imaginary* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2016), 11. See also Chiara Cavalieri’s contribution in this issue.

⁴ See for example: Cosgrove Denis E., *Social formation and symbolic landscape* (Madison (Wisc.): University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1998 – originally 1980).

contributions in this issue we see a search to capture as much complexity as possible within the drawing and to make multiple meanings possible. In drawing, the acts of omitting and adding, of simplifying and compiling, compete with each other. How can the landscape and urban design drawing evoke an illuminating but non-hegemonic image of the existing and create a desired future, and leave room for evolution and multiplicity?

A third, related observation concerns the field of tension between the mental space of the drawing and its role as a means of negotiation. Because of its mediating role the drawing is not seen as an autonomous object by definition. It is striking how, in landscape design and urbanism, drawings often occur in series and also have several authors. If they are made by one author, they are often the result of multiple voices. Nevertheless, we note that in the process of making and negotiating through the drawing, its autonomy comes back to the foreground. Frits Palmboom speaks in his contribution of the 'enlightening moment' (and also the 'creative error'), in which the process of drawing goes beyond the straightforward interpretation of the existing and the wishes of stakeholders and evokes a desired reality that both incorporates and transcends it. In a seemingly paradoxical way, this interpretation thus occurs primarily through the reduction inherent in the activity of drawing itself: a simplification of reality that at the same time opens the door to a multiplicity of meanings and possibilities.

A fourth and last observation concerns the historical background against which almost all contributions can be placed. They revolve around the criticism of orthodox modernism, in which form was unambiguously linked to function, and urban and landscape matters were notoriously (over)simplified. They recount the interest that has arisen since the late 1960s in the sustainable form of the city and landscape and in a more open and dynamic relationship with its processes and programmes. In later decades, the dimension of uncertainty and temporal dynamics were addressed even more strongly. Without wanting to offer a complete historical overview, several authors shed light on this. Thus the Italian 'descriptive tradition' comes to the fore, fed by Aldo Rossi's criticism of the reductionism of functional urbanism. On this basis, designers and theorists such as Giancarlo De Carlo, and Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò developed since the 1970s a design idiom based on a reading of the existing landscape. A similar situation is sketched for the Netherlands, where since the end of the 1970s interest in the shape of the city was increasingly linked to that of the landscape, as an alternative to urban design that was anchored in abstract housing schemes or a technocratic approach to infrastructure issues. We also see similar developments elsewhere in Europe and the United States, which give rise to the development of new genres such as the figure-ground drawing, the diagram and the score, and the layered approach. Likewise, in these historical examples, the tension between the drawing as mental space and the drawing as an instrument of negotiation is strongly present.

Reflective Practices and Historical Cases

This issue consists of a number of longer contributions, which build up a reflection from multiple images that were drawn from contemporary or historical practices, and a number of shorter texts that reflect on a single image. The ten extensive contributions can be divided according to the position of the author: half of them are reflections by designers on their own contemporary drawing practice, while the other half consists of reflections on historical cases.

Several of the designers that reflect on their own work explore the agency of the drawing as embedded in a process of spatial as well as social transformation. This is the case for William Mann, who recounts the evolution of the drawing in the development of a landscape strategy for the Upper Lee Valley. The process of walking and drawing led to an acupunctural approach in dialogue with the stakeholders. Chiara Cavalieri reflects on the cartographic and design project 'Blue Space' for the French-Belgian Eurometropolis around Lille and Courtrai. Hinged on the water system, a series of different forms of drawings generate new meaning for a fragmented geographical and political context. Mapping became a form of empowerment. The contributions of Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, and of Julie Marin and Bruno De Meulder, also discuss the role of medium and technique. While the former focusses on a tapestry stitched by women workers in the textile industry of Delhi, the latter deals with a synoptic assemblage informed by different stakeholder groups in Limburg, Belgium. In both cases the assembly of fragments related to multiple authors generates a new image of the landscape. The participants are empowered both to take ownership of the present and of the future of the space they live in.

This issue of *OASE* also illuminates the agency of (the) drawing at the level of the designer's internal world. Frits Palmboom reflects on his own design practice from his 1981 graduation project at Delft University of Technology. He describes a process of reading the site that gradually turns into a design, by constantly redrawing the map, thus reshaping the process of landscape formation on the roll of sketching paper until the drawing begins to tell its own story, making new relationships possible. The drawing forms the designer's own laboratory, which offers space for experimentation and contemplation; it enables him/her to make discoveries that do not emerge immediately from the conversation with the external partners, but that can enrich it.

While these contributions offer an insight into drawing from the inside, five others reflect on more historically situated and institutionally anchored drawing practices, particularly in the Netherlands and Italy.

Two articles deal with traditions and practices within an educational setting. Elke Couchez examines the 1977 summer course in Urbino, organized by Giancarlo De Carlo's ILAUD. Its education programme was intended to break away from universalist and modernist design methods. The Urbino edition focused on the 'reading' of space and its social, historical and topographical transformations through the drawing. Similarly, as he reflects on his own design practice Paul Broekhuisen departs from Rein Geurtsen's course, which introduced contextualism into urban planning education in the Netherlands in the 1980s. Both the city itself and the design process were conceived as a series of spatial adaptations, linked to political, technological, social and economic transformations.

Finally, three texts reveal the discourses around specific forms of drawing, and their discursive context. In the 1970s, in circles around Colin Rowe, the figure-ground plan was rediscovered as a means of analysing the shape of the city. Praised and reviled for both his abstraction and contextualisation, Roberto Damiani traces the history of this form of drawing, and advocates its qualities and potential as a descriptive, projective and discursive instrument.

The various drawings for Melun Senart produced by OMA in 1987, the subject of the article of Holger Schurk, display different degrees of autonomy as well as different relationships to reality. On the basis of this series Schurk, with Rem

Koolhaas, problematises the fixation on the form of the city as a 'primary vessel of meaning'. The contribution by Marialessandra Secchi and Marco Voltini questions the current practice of drawing with thematic layers. The authors see a public role for the drawing as one of the prerequisites for a 'unitary moment', a reflection on society, the city, and their future. By contrast, they denounce the sectoral approach and the lack of a specific 'spatialisation' of specific layer approaches and plea for an approach that stimulates rather than reduces complexity.

The longer contributions are interspersed with shorter descriptions of specific drawings. These are placed between the longer texts in a rather associative way, to offer a broad perspective on the possibilities, roles and techniques of the drawing. A number of them show a variety of historical examples: the contributions by Gianni Lobosco, Sandra Parvu, Marc Treib, Koenraad Danneels and Bram van Kaathoven. Reflections on own drawings from practice or education are by Heidi Svenningsen, Gini Lee and Antonia Besa, Kees Christiaanse and Pieter Schengenga. They form a richly composed gallery, where each piece is exemplary for its medium and technique, the form of the drawing and the spatial and societal context in which it operates.

Autonomy and Anchoring

Together, all these articles explore the way abstraction and contextualisation challenge and prevail over each other in different drawing types. It is indeed abstraction that allows new imaginations of the future, but it is contextualisation that can make these concrete in local practice. In both operations the act of drawing is crucial.

Throughout the entire issue, the drawings construct a parallel narrative of their own, forming a visual landscape. The drawings speak their own language, consisting of lines, patterns, forms, colours and shades. Their agency – as a mediator between analysis, design and conversation – originates from its ability to surpass verbal language and enable multiplicity and ambiguity of its own kind. A drawing works because it refers to the world, and is a part of it, but does not coincide with it. It always retains a degree of autonomy. A drawing guides the spoken and written conversation about the world without directly mirroring it. This is equally true of all design disciplines, but is maybe even more challenging in the complex and elusive field of urbanism and landscape design. This issue of *OASE* is a plea to explore, cherish and develop both the anchoring of the drawing in the world and its autonomous mental space – in education, research and practice.

Translation: Kornelia Dimitrova

Notes

1 Bart Decroos et al., 'The Drawing as Practice', *OASE* 105 (2020), 13-23.

2 André Corboz, 'La descrizione tra lettura e scrittura', 2nd International Conference on Urbanism: 'Describing territories', Prato (1995), later published as 'La description: entre lecture et écriture', in : André Corboz, *Le Territoire comme palimpseste et autres essais* (Paris: Les éditions de l'imprimeur, 2001).

3 Jil Desimini and Charles Waldheim, *Cartographic Grounds: Projecting the Landscape Imaginary* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2016), 11. See also Chiara Cavalieri's contribution in this issue.

4 See, for example: Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998 [1980]).